

The Polar Bear Leadership Camp at Churchill will be continued - Zoos from polar bear range countries in Europe wanted for Assistance!!!!

– to recruit and support a 16 – 18 years old high school student for the 2006 Polar Bear Leadership Camp in Churchill.

by Lydia Kolter, Zoologischer Garten Köln

In October 2004 the first Polar Bear Leadership Camp organised by Polar Bears International (PBI) took place in Churchill, Manitoba. Polar Bears International is an NGO, dedicated to polar bear conservation by supporting research projects in the field and in captivity and by promoting conservation through education. The PBI website serves that purpose by providing excellent and up-to-date information on biology, status and conservation needs of polar bears compiled by the leading polar bear scientists. The development of an on-line library with references on polar bears in scientific and public journals as well as the publication of the results of the 1st international polar bear husbandry conference in San Diego in 2004 contribute to the education of the public. For details see www.polarbearsinternational.org or take the link to that website from the Bear TAG section of the EAZA website.

PBI's most recent project is the above mentioned Polar Bear Leadership Camp in Churchill, which is based on the idea that "kids teach kids". To get more young people interested in conservation and research on arctic topics and especially on polar bears PBI invited **12** students/pupils of high schools from the US, Canada, Australia and Germany to visit Churchill. I got the chance to choose and accompany a German student, Meike Bilstein, Köln, to the first Leadership camp. In Churchill the students got first hand information by rangers of the Manitoban Conservation Authorities and by Churchill citizens about polar bear related issues. In this "capital of the polar bears" bears and humans come quite close to each other and a modus vivendi was developed during the last 20 years. A visit to one of the largest polar bear denning areas in the nearby Wapusk National Park preceded the absolute highlight of the tour, the four days at the coast on a Tundra Buggy®, where the students assisted researchers in collecting data on the effect of tourism on polar bear behaviour. Each day the students had to post a report on the PBI web, in order inform PBI members and their school mates at home about the impressions they got of the situation and the work at and around Churchill and of course about the polar bears and other wildlife which could be observed from the Tundra Buggies®. These diaries as well as the first essays on the effect of the experience in the Arctic are available on the PBI website.

In order to actually verify the intention "kids teach kids", it was crucial that the student's high school agreed to get involved and to support the "home part" of the Leadership camp by offering the necessary computer equipment and by including "polar aspects" into the lessons. With the assistance of Irene Schiedges, who is affiliated to the educational section of Cologne zoo, and the engagement of the director and the teachers of the Heinrich-Heine Gymnasium, Köln, this worked out very well. During the three months in autumn prior, during and after the Leadership camp the biology lessons focussed on polar bears for the younger age classes, on arctic food chains in the middle classes and on behavioural and ecological methods and research questions around polar bear conservation in the final classes. At the end the result of the efforts were presented to parents and guests as posters, games and as a polar bear website.

After the positive results the board of Polar Bears International decided to continue with Leadership camps in Churchill in the next years. Another decision was to have also in the future one student from Europe participating and to have zoos involved in recruiting students.

In agreement with the president of IBA, Robert Buchanan, and with the EAZA bear TAG, where the matter was discussed during the mid-year meeting in Ljubljana this June, in the next years candidates for the camp should preferably come from the European polar bear range countries, Denmark, Norway and Russia. We think raising awareness among young people for their own nature and natural heritage would be most effective for polar bear conservation in range countries.

Zoos in Denmark, Norway and Russian interested to get involved and to actively search for a student please contact me: lkolter@zoo-koeln.de. If several zoos are successful in finding a student the one with the best qualifications will be selected. A student should be found until spring 2006. It is in the zoo's responsibility to make sure that the chosen student as well as the school where he/she studies fulfils certain requirements.

The student should be

- at least 16 years,
- at school for at least another year before the final exams,
- excellent in public speaking
- interested in the problems of the arctic and
- last but not least speaks English very well

The student's school should

- actively support the student,
- should integrate the whole project into its lessons and
- should have access to the internet, so that the students at home can follow at least virtually their schoolmate on the trip to Churchill and share the experiences immediately.

The approach, how to select a student is up to the zoo – the whole project is still in a pioneer and trial phase therefore, PBI does not yet have a fixed procedure.

PBI will take over the travelling costs of the student and an accompanying colleague from the zoo – from Winnipeg to Churchill back to Winnipeg. For the flight to Winnipeg external funding – either by the zoo, the school or private - has to be sought!!

Please keep in mind: Warnings by the IUCN-SSC Polar Bears about the effects of global warming and environmental pollution on the survival of polar bears get louder. Especially in the European Arctic toxins in the marine food chain seem to be a considerable threat to polar bears. Therefore the conservation message has to be spread soon and here all zoos, in particular those keeping polar bears, can contribute considerably.